



Pages of a Forbidden Tome

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TOOLS:

- [Books \(1\)](#)
- [Coffee maker \(1\)](#)
- [Heat gun \(1\)](#)
- [Laser printer \(1\)](#)
- [Metal tray \(1\)](#)
- [Paintbrush \(1\)](#)



PARTS:

- [Printer paper \(1\)](#)
- [Coffee \(1\)](#)
- [Water \(1\)](#)
- [Ammonium chloride \(1\)](#)
- [Paper towels \(1\)](#)
- [Wood \(Flat piece\)](#)
[*or cardboard*](#)

SUMMARY

They could be from *The Necronomicon*, *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, or simply Poe's "quaint and curious volume," but everybody needs at least a few tattered leaves of ancient mind-blasting arcanum lying around to impress guests. Especially around Halloween.

This tutorial presents an easy method for producing weathered "antiqued" paper with burned edges. The trick of soaking white paper in coffee or tea to give it an old, yellowed look is very familiar, but the process for selectively burning the edges of the paper is something I discovered on my own. A simple and safe chemical treatment is used to selectively char the page, only where it has been applied, upon mild heat treatment.

Step 1 — Create and print your art



- Print your art using a laser printer, not inkjet. Most inkjet inks are water soluble and will not stand up to the water-based solutions used in this tutorial.
- The artwork I used is from an imagining of Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* by French artist Philippe Druillet that appeared in the October 1979 issue of *Heavy Metal* magazine, a copy of which I own. If you can't get your hands on the same magazine, there are other good sources for faux-arcana graphics.
- Dover has a clip-art collection called *Magic and Mystical Symbols* that's chock full of appropriate art.
- [The Howard Phillips Lovecraft Historical Society](#) has some *Necronomicon* pages for sale as well as some great online resources for making prop documents, including a package of free fonts.
- If you're really into it, [Propnomicon](#) is an entire blog dedicated to reproduction artifacts from the Cthulhu mythos.



Step 2 — Soak the pages



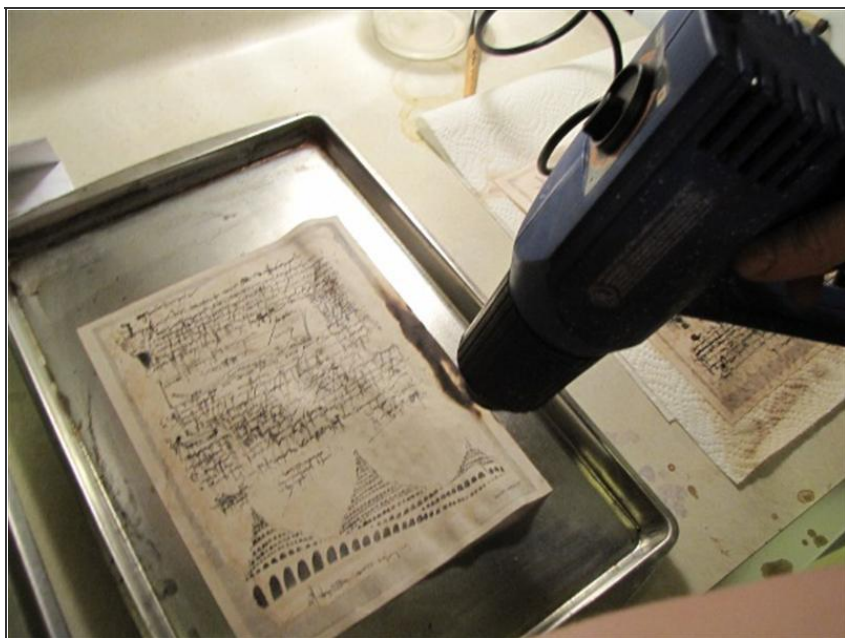
- Make strong coffee using about 6 oz of ground beans in 2 cups of water. Let it stand overnight, if possible.
- Pour off the coffee into a shallow baking sheet and then soak your laser-printed pages in it one at a time, for five minutes each.
- Remove each page from the coffee bath and, without giving too much time for the coffee to drip off, couch it between two layers of paper towels under a piece of cardboard weighted with a stack of books.
- Allow the pages to dry in this manner for 2 hours before proceeding.


Step 3 — Apply the burn treatment



- The pages do not have to be bone-dry to go on. 
- Using a brush, apply a saturated solution of ammonium chloride to the edges of each page where the burn effect is desired.
- You may wish to add a drop or two of food coloring to the solution to make it easy to see where the treatment has been applied and where it has not. Any coloration thus imparted to the paper should burn away in the next step. 

Step 4 — Heat



- You don't have to let the solution dry before proceeding. 
- Working over a heat-stable surface and with good ventilation, heat the edges of the page with a heat gun on the high setting. This will drive off any remaining moisture quite rapidly, and you may want to weight the page down in the middle to keep it from blowing around in the air blast.
- Depending on the strength of your heat gun, it may take a minute or so before you begin to see an effect, but when you do it will be obvious. The paper will char rapidly just in those areas where the ammonium chloride has been applied.

Step 5 — Remove burned areas



- The charred areas of the page will be dry and crumbly and should flake off with mild pressure from the fingers.
- Work your way around the page, making sure at least to remove all the straight-cut edges of the original sheet, and also to leave some burned bits behind to make it clear that your forbidden tome was rescued at the last moment from the cleansing flames of the Inquisition's pyres.

The charring solution works because of the tendency of ammonium chloride to decompose, when heated, to give ammonia gas and hydrochloric acid. The ammonia gas evaporates into the atmosphere, leaving behind strong hydrochloric acid, which is what actually chars the page. This sounds nastier than it is, in practice. Prudence dictates erring on the side of caution and always working with strong ventilation, but, frankly, I did this in my closed kitchen with the air conditioner on and didn't notice much more than a slight burning smell.

An easy way to prepare a saturated solution of ammonium chloride (or any salt, really), is to dump a bunch of it into a jar and add water, but not enough to dissolve it all. So you end up with a layer of solid at the bottom of the jar, all the time. The liquid layer on top will always be saturated with the salt no matter what the ambient temperature may be.

I'm totally thrilled with my results, but if I were to do it again, I might try a slightly heavier laser printer paper, perhaps some of that resumé-grade stuff, just to see if it ended up feeling more like antique parchment at the end of the process.

